A TASK WAITING . . .
MUSIC TO BE PERFORMED
EASTER - APRIL 8, 2007

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24
Isaiah 65: 17-24
Luke 23: 50-24: 1-12

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." Luke 24:5

If it is really true that in going to his death he took upon himself, and in some sense exhausted, the full weight of the world's evil — there clearly then is a task waiting to be done. The music he wrote must be performed. The early disciples saw this and got on with it. When Jesus emerged from the tomb, justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty rose with him. Something has happened in and through Jesus as a result of which the world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God's future has arrived in the present. Instead of mere echoes, we hear the voice itself: a voice which speaks of rescue from evil and death, and hence of new creation.
N. T. Wright
Simply Christian

Dear God, with millions of others, we come to church this morning because we heard that a resurrection has happened. We have come because we have heard that finally death has been defeated, that there is something loose in our world that is not beholden to nor afraid of death. We come to hear about it again, to embrace it and hold it close, to be part of it. Startle us again, O God, as you startled his friends and disciples long ago, with your love — in Jesus Christ our Lord.

One of the very nice things that happens around Easter is that people become deferential and extraordinarily kind to ministers. People worry about us, tell us to take it easy, sometimes bring us cookies and a latté from Starbucks. "How are you holding up?" they ask: knowing that not only are there extra jobs to do during Lent and Holy Week and Easter, but the preachers have their work cut out for them. For one thing, there will be a lot of people in the pews on Easter morning and so the hidden message behind the kindness, cookies and latté is "You only have one shot at a lot of those people, so make it a good one." For another thing, the preacher's task today is to talk about something that doesn't submit easily to talk, to rational, reasonable discourse, namely the resurrection from the dead of

Jesus. Every preacher in the land knows that he or she is not up to this task. Every preacher is grateful for the other ways the resurrection is celebrated: the great Easter music, the once-a-year opportunity to stand up and sing, full volume: "Jesus Christ is Risen Today: Alleluia!": the great organ and brass, the flowers, the beautiful children in their new Easter outfits, the Easter hats.

When on occasion I whine a little bit and call attention to the fact that while the topic for the day is a given, the responsibility to convey it with new creativity annually is fairly daunting, my closest advisor tells me what she also tells me at Christmas: "Keep it simple. Nothing fancy. What we want is to sing the hymns and hear the story."

Every year, it seems, someone does something outrageous enough to get into the news media and Easter sermons. This year an artist by the name of Cosimo Cavallaro created a life-size chocolate Jesus on the cross for a New York art exhibit. It upset a lot of people, charges of blasphemy were leveled, Fox News saw it as further evidence of the cultural war against Christianity in our country. Death threats came to the artist. The entire exhibit was cancelled and columnist Kathleen Parker wisely advised her fellow good Catholics and all of us to calm down. Surely the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, she suggested, doesn't get his feelings hurt over a big piece of candy.

I actually had a mental image of God laughing about the whole matter. And it reminded me of something Anne Lamott said. She was reflecting on her mother's sad struggle with Alzheimer's and the start up of the Iraq War and she wrote: "We're Easter people in a Good Friday world . . . I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion: I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection — the resurrection vision of the kid in our Sunday School class who drew a picture of the Easter bunny outside the tomb: everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking!" (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 140).

As usual Anne Lamott expresses something important and profound in her deceptively light and funny way. The fact is Christians have been trying for 2,000 years to make this whole business a little more reasonable; to make sense out of something that confounds common sense. Maybe they crucified the wrong man. Maybe it was Simon of Cyrene who everybody saw pick up the cross and carry it for Jesus when he fell. That must be it. They crucified Simon by mistake and Jesus melted into the crowd and walked away. Or — maybe that vinegar he was given when he was hanging on the cross and crying out for something to drink was actually a drug that induced all the signs of death and he revived in the tomb later and walked out. Maybe the disciples stole the body. Maybe the gardener moved it. Maybe he went back to his home in Galilee, married Mary Magdalene, had a

son named Judah, and arranged for all of their bones to be placed in ossuary boxes and shipped down to Jerusalem so twenty-first century promoters could launch a media sensation, “The Last Tomb of Jesus.”

The early accounts each describe Easter morning somewhat differently. What they all agree on was that Jesus of Nazareth was dead, as dead as you can ever be dead. Roman crucifixion was efficient. And if, for one reason or another, the victim didn’t die, the Centurions assigned to the detail were responsible to finish the job. The earliest creeds of the church want to make sure that the point is clear: “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into hell.” That phrase — so curious — so dramatic — does not mean that Jesus was punished, but that he was complete, utterly, humanly dead.

You know, when there is a death in the family someone has to step up and do what needs doing. Someone has to do the dishes, straighten the furniture, put a meat loaf in the oven. Someone has to take charge and call the undertaker, the florist, the minister and the cemetery. Fred Craddock writes: “When the ground gives way beneath your feet, when heaven and earth are shaken, when life’s reason has been removed by death, something has to be the same, dependable and certain. Luke reports how a group of women (and one man) found a place to stand when everything else was shaken” (*Interpretation*, p. 277).

Joseph was the man’s name, from Arimathea, a distinguished member of the Supreme Court in Israel. Joseph did the unthinkable — went to the Roman governor and asked for the body of the man who had been executed by the Romans. Sabbath was approaching and Jewish law required that burial happen before sundown, not that Pilate would have cared much about that detail. In fact it was customary to leave the crucified up there on the cross as a warning to would-be-troublemakers. Luke tells us that this good and brave man took the body down, wrapped it in linen and placed it in his own tomb. Joseph did what someone needed to do.

A group of women who had walked all the way down from Galilee with him the prior week, were still around, watching. One by one the men had all fled as he was arrested and tried. Peter stayed around for a while until finally he too ran away. The women watched — as he was tormented and crucified, stayed there as he slowly died, watched as Joseph took his body down, followed and watched as Joseph placed the body in the tomb. They weren’t finished yet. There was more work to do. The body — the body of their friend — had to be cleaned and then anointed with oils and ointment. But that would have to wait because now it is the Sabbath. So they watched and waited all that quiet Saturday.

At first light, early dawn, that wonderfully mysterious time when it is not yet day and the sky is gray and it is difficult to see clearly, they made their way back to Joseph's tomb to do what needed to be done. When they arrived the stone had been rolled away — the body was gone. Two men were there — the women were terrified and fell on their faces. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" the men asked. "He's not here, but has risen."

Nobody expected that. Nobody could believe it. When they returned to where the men were hiding, their breathless announcement was dismissed — ridiculous: an "idle tale."

In a new book, *Friday, Saturday, Sunday*, Hope College Professor David Cunningham writes: "The men in their group had scattered and fled. Perhaps they were just trying to lie low until the holy days had passed and things had returned to the way they had always been. But one of those troublesome women had brought them strange news: so they had gone to the tomb, had seen the evidence, had thought about it. And then, having done what they set out to do, having accomplished their mission, all the men went home . . .

"For the women, things weren't that simple." Professor Cunningham quotes poet Janet Marley:

> "It was unfinished
> We stayed there, fixed, until the end
> women waiting for the body we loved;
> And then it was unfinished.
> There was no time to cherish, cleanse, anoint" (p. 133-134)

And so the women come to the tomb at first light and the women hear the words that resound across the centuries — "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen." In New Testament scholar N. T. Wright's memorable words . . . "there is a task waiting to be done. The music he wrote must be performed. The early disciples saw this and got on with it."

The temptation has always been to try to prove it. Peter Gomes says that Easter turns the preacher into a lawyer examining the evidence, looking at each piece to prove the case. Gomes remembers something Sherlock Holmes once said: "One in pursuit of a criminal should not pay too much attention to evidence, Watson, it gets in the way" (*What We Forgot to Tell You*, p. 257). And Eugene Peterson remembers the preacher in his youth launching an Easter Sermon on the Thirteen Incontrovertible Proofs of the Resurrection, a sermon that went on for an hour and a half, by which time no one much cared any longer.

There is a basic issue here, an issue of truth. If human reason is the sole arbiter of truth, if truth is limited to what we can see, analyze and understand, the very idea of resurrection is preposterous. But if there is truth not limited by human understanding, then we live in a whole new situation: a new heaven and a new earth, in the prophet Isaiah's wonderful phrase, a world not limited, determined by fate, but a new world full of hope and possibility. And so let's not minimize, trivialize the resurrection by trying to explain it.

John Updike wrote a poem once, *Seven Stanzas for Easter* —

> "Make no mistake: if He rose at all
> it was as His body . . .
> It was not as the flowers,
> each soft Spring recurrent;
> it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;
> it was as His Flesh: ours.
> Let us not mock God with metaphor,
> analogy, sidestepping transcendence,
> making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the door."

What happened, of course, is that the disciples of Jesus walked through the door into a new world suddenly full of hope and possibility. What happened was the frightened, discouraged, grieving men and women somehow were transformed into brave, hopeful, loving bearers of good news — which they could not and would not stop talking about. What happened was that Good Friday people became Easter people who lived out the rest of their days in the full confidence that there was nothing to fear, no darkness so dark, no threat so dire, no death so deadly — to hold them back. And so you can see the reality of Easter and resurrection all around you: in courageous people who live with hope and grace and love even in the midst of dreadful circumstances. You can see resurrection in the woman who continues to fight the good fight for peace and justice: the man who will not give up but lives with debilitating disease. You see resurrection in the parents who continue to care for their challenged daughter: the physician who uses his retirement and resources to start a clinic in Cameroon and treat AIDS patients: the teacher who will not give up on her students and shows up in her public school classroom day after day: the nurse who stays by the bedside of a patient dying alone, the musician practicing relentlessly to add beauty to life: the woman in chemotherapy putting on her stylish wig and planning next summer's vacation: the ordinary people who will not settle for war and injustice and little children starving and AIDS — but pray for and work for and give themselves for God's kingdom. You can see resurrection in the lives of Easter people who

know that we are living in a new world, that hope is stronger than despair, that love is stronger than death.

"Easter is so profound" Anne Lamott wrote. "Easter says that love is more powerful than death: bigger than the dark, bigger than cancer, bigger than airport security lines." She was with a dear friend who was dying — "Hope is not about proving anything. It's about choosing to believe this one thing: that love is bigger than any grim, bleak (stuff) anyone can throw at us" (p. 274).

A good friend of mine died two years ago, Walter Bouman, Professor of Theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus. We became good friends over the years. He was a favorite teacher in the adult education program at the church I was serving. We made him an honorary Presbyterian and about the only thing we ever seriously disagreed about was his passionate preference for the St. Louis Cardinals. I have spoken about him before. Not long after he retired Walt was diagnosed with inoperable, terminal cancer. As he died he continued to teach. I keep his last sermons and essays in my Easter file.

He wrote, not about anger but simple sadness that he would not see grandchildren mature. And he wrote about life and beauty and commitment to things that matter, and living every day of life to its fullest.

His grandchildren asked him what he thought heaven would be like and Walt said, "Great music without station breaks." "But you like Bach and Beethoven" they said: "What if someone likes Led Zeppelin?" "Then they get a soundproof room," Walt said.

When a newspaper reporter asked him how he remained so buoyant, so alive, Walt replied:

"My greatest source of encouragement is the Christian story of God into which I was baptized in July of 1929. The Christian news is that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from death, that death no longer has dominion over him. I have bet my living and now I am able to bet my dying, that Jesus will have the last word."

And that, dear friends, is the good word today. There is nothing to be afraid of, because Jesus will have the last word.

The great painters created masterpieces — of the Annunciation — the angel coming to Mary, the nativity, the crucifixion. There are not many great paintings of the resurrection. One of my favorites is in the monastery of San Marcos in Florence, where Fra Angelico, one of the monks, painted perhaps the most famous rendering of the Annunciation. It is stunning and

many tourists look at it and leave. But Fra Angelico also painted frescoes on the walls of each monk's cell. And one of them — brilliant colors, almost grotesquely exaggerated figures, shows the risen and victorious Christ standing with his feet on a partially opened door in the ground — out of which is peeking and trying to escape an awful looking demon, Satan I assume. It is not a particularly pretty picture — but as you stand there looking at it, it becomes clear that the artist was conveying to his age the best of all news. That terrible figure trying to get out represents everything those people were afraid of: everything that threatened them: disease, the plague, hunger, war, and death itself. And there is Jesus the risen Christ with his foot on the door —

"Did you notice," someone asked me recently, "when at Communion we say the 23rd Psalm together, everybody seems to know the words, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil' and we all say them a little louder? I guess it's because that's what it's all about, isn't it?"

Well, yes. Even in the valley of the shadow of death — I will fear no evil.

That is what it's all about.

There is nothing to fear, nothing.

Love is stronger than death.

We are free from clinging tightly, desperately, to our lives:
- free from the need to squeeze as much as we can from life
- free to give life away, free to give ourselves without holding back to the dear
people, the important causes, the precious and important projects that we care
most passionately about
- free to perform the music he wrote
- free to live our lives, every day of our lives right up to and including the last one,
with cheerful abandon.

God has given us a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus Christ is risen.

Amen